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AUTHOR Laban, Lawrence F.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a variable-credit advanced writing course that allows non-English majors to set their own goals for writing and to develop specific writing skills that apply to their major fields. The course is a unitized sequence of three five-week sessions. The first session discusses the theoretical product model and process model for the whole essay and for paragraph development. The second unit is more practical than theoretical in approach, developing skills needed for writing style, such as sentence structure, word choice, proofreading, and revision. The third unit emphasizes reading and research techniques and requires help from teachers in other disciplines. Students provide samples of their writing and elect to participate in any one, or all, of the sessions, depending on their needs, goals, and available time. (RL)

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Maximizing Student Alternatives: A Variable-Credit Advanced Composition Course

Lawrence F. Laban
Virginia Commonwealth University

A major concern of today's writing courses, from the freshman to the advanced level, is the problem of directing our students to write for a specific audience. We teach them to vary their rhetorical techniques, to choose their language carefully to reach their intended audience--to maximize their alternatives and strategies in writing. Yet what do we, as teachers of writing, do to reach our audience--or, more precisely, the varied audiences in our writing classes? From freshman to advanced composition we may have finally become convinced that our courses must meet the needs of students and can no longer give them either a "cultural" introduction to literature or a workshop in how to write "personal" essays. But what have we substituted for these traditional and, in their own way, still worthwhile, concerns?

At Virginia Commonwealth University there has been a change in the right direction: since freshman composition is a service course, its goals were formulated only after discussion with administrators and faculty from the various schools of the university. These goals include the ever-popular "back to the basics" plus a real attempt to give students the tools they will need in other university courses, particularly research tools. Advanced courses in technical writing, legal writing, and business writing have been added to the curriculum. Yet, in many of these courses we blithely go on teaching students MLA standard documentation, hardly considering that significantly less than one percent of the students in each of those classes will engage in literary scholarship. We exchange valuable ideas of meetings like this one about satisfying student needs and maximizing student alternatives--but putting those ideas into practice hasn't been easy.

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New course content--admitting, for example, that legal, technical, and business writing may require different skills and models than the traditional advanced composition offers--is one way of increasing those alternatives. But there is another approach to maximizing student alternatives separate from (but also related) to course content--an approach that allows the student to practice the kind of writing he needs (thus getting out of the MLA rut) in the time he is willing to spend. And that is a variable-credit unitized system, most useful in advanced composition, but with many aspects applicable to freshman composition and technical writing as well. The kind of variable-credit advanced writing course I shall describe works toward these two goals: giving students the chance to practice the kinds of writing they actually do and doing it in the time span they choose.

A variable-credit advanced writing course begins with three basic assumptions about students who take the course: one, they are there voluntarily because they know they need help; two, they have specific writing tasks, either from another university class or a job assignment; and three, they know, at least approximately, how much time and effort they are willing to devote to their writing. The instructor should begin with at least two main principles: one, effective written communication is a series of learnable skills; and two, these skills can be taught best in a unitized process sequence.

These assumptions are particularly important in an advanced composition course for non-English majors such as the one I am describing. The course is not required, nor does it fulfill any requirements for the English major. Students enroll because their instructors in their major fields tell them they had better if they want to pass their courses and because they know they will get help where they need it most--with papers due in other classes.

These students, then, know they have problems, although they may need our help in pinpointing exactly what the problems are.

We don't need to be reminded that few students nowadays want to write well for its own sake--whatever that means. Most students who enroll in writing courses beyond the freshman level (other than creative writing) do so for very specific reasons. Not, "what's the best way to write a technical report," they ask theoretically, but "how do you write a research paper for Urban Studies 348?" "How do you prepare a case study for Social Work 522?" "How do you revise an Anthropology 201 book report to change the grade from F+ to something, hopefully, better?" That these students tend to be strongly goal-oriented ("I have this research paper to write," they moan sadly) is actually a plus for the writing instructor. Motivation--that old bugaboo of required courses and of student evaluations of teaching--comes directly from the student. And there are not only specific tasks and audiences for these assignments, but there is usually direct feedback to the student--not just from his writing teacher but from that "real" audience. Perhaps the D he receives on a mass communications term paper will convince him that effective writing is worth the effort more than all our own pleadings about the glories of the language.

Time is money for these students. Most of them juniors and seniors, many of them graduate students (who are in the course because their theses won't be accepted until they "fix up" the writing), some, particularly at urban institutions, working professionally on jobs for which they must prepare written reports--they have neither the time nor the desire to return to day one--freshman composition--nor to study the theory and practice of style from Ascahm to Tom Wolfe--a traditional concern of Advanced Composition; noble pursuits, indeed, but hardly in the line of the chemistry or sociology major

who has a research paper due in three weeks and plans to spend the next twenty days in a state of mild panic and severe depression.

Some of these students (let me add here to brighten the picture a little), have neither the time, desire, nor need to repeat freshman English. For them advanced composition is the place to pick up a few specific additional skills, like writing an effective process report for a lab or preparing a proposal for an honors project. Processing these students through a traditional semester or quarter course is like making someone read the OED from cover to cover merely to find out how to spell "rape." Surely there is a better way to give these students what they need--and perhaps a little more--and that way is through variable credit.

But what about the teacher of advanced composition for non-English majors faced with these students, hungry only for that A in history or psychology? Those of us whose primary training is literary, or, at best, how to teach the 500-word theme, face some very special problems. But we also gain some very special advantages. The diversity of goals and projects the students bring to a variable-credit class, not to mention their coming and going every five weeks (as I will explain in a moment), may threaten anarchy in the classroom, but is really an opportunity to bring new ideas and methods to teaching--many of which can be carried back to revitalize a tired freshman composition class.

And even with students doing different kinds of work for different numbers of credits there is no need to give up organization, syllabi, and advanced planning for the course--indeed, they are essential. Student alternatives are maximized not through a breakdown of "conventional" teaching methods/roles/organizations (although that is certainly possible), nor, I insist, by lowering standards of effective writing, clear prose, and

correct grammar--but by letting students choose the particular tasks they will accomplish, how they can best meet their own writing goals, and how much time they will put in behind a hot pencil. This system goes beyond simple contract grading in that credits, kinds and amounts of work done are negotiable. If the instructor chooses to contract for quality grades (A,B,C, etc.) he can do so with this system. I, for one, choose not. Thus, a variable-credit advanced composition course can serve the needs of varied students and varied faculty teaching styles.

There are three major factors to consider in organizing a variable-credit course and in assigning credit to students. They are: one, how much time the student spends in class completing class assignments. This first element can be further factored: will the class be divided into three five-week sections for one credit each, or will students be able to come once or twice per week for one or two credits, respectively. Although both systems are possible, in practice the latter turns out to be highly improbable. It is more efficient to allow one-credit students who cannot meet the full class schedule to take the entire course as a tutorial. The important thing here is the flexibility of choice.

The second factor is the amount of writing the student will do. This, of course, can depend on his assignments from other classes. The instructor may use number of finished pages, or also consider the difficulty and time of each individual assignment. If the student does not have enough work for other classes to satisfy the requirements, he can easily create his own tasks, modeled on ones for other classes--or, if that fails, I'm sure every instructor has a trunkful of useful assignments for the student who doesn't know what to write. But in a course letting students write for other classes this is hardly ever a problem.

The third factor is the specific writing skills the student must demonstrate--best if they are agreed upon in advance by student and teacher. These might include paragraph organization, effective transions, precise sentences, correct documentation (in whatever form the student uses), etc., etc.

The simplest procedure which considers all these factors is to assign one credit for each five weeks of classwork and eight or nine pages of written work, allowing the student to develop his particular writing goals (based on the skills process organization I will suggest in a moment).

Many students, however, in fact, the vast majority in the two years I have been teaching this course--choose to stay beyond their original intention. They either voluntarily and unofficially audit additional weeks or officially add credits. Those who stay unofficially do so because they are gaining skills they didn't think they need, or hardly knew existed; those who stay officially usually have additional papers assigned in other courses. The flexibility of adding credits or even joining the class for the first time--every five weeks during the semester appeals to students. Even more appealing, they can also drop credits as they go along if they can't keep up to the pace they set at the start. In addition, they may take this variable-credit course for one credit each of three semesters running--or whenever they have papers for other classes. A total of three credits will be allowed toward graduation, however the student arranges them.

One course organization that works particularly well divides the course into three five-week segments, each self-contained units, but the second two build on skills from the previous ones. Thus a student who enters for the second unit should already be fairly proficient in the

skills of the first. This can be determined in a brief writing sample. And the fact that freshman composition is a pre-requisite ensure some basic business skills at the start, but not many.

The first unit, called "The Whole Thing," presents to the student product and process models for the whole essay as well as for individual paragraph development. Logical organization and clarity of ideas are emphasized. Students are presented with a form into which they can plug any immediate assignments. Let me emphasize that the "product model" is a suggested form not a fail-proof formula. It gives students a clear picture of what their assignment should "look like" when they're completed--where all the pieces go from the title to the thesis to the supporting evidence to the footnotes. It is particularly important to give this immediate access to the whole thing since papers in other courses may be due almost at once. The content of the product model need be no different from what we teach in freshman composition (the 500-word theme), the finer points of each segment of the model--effective opening paragraphs, good sentence style, clear transitions and signals, etc. --can be added later. This difference in delivery (doing the whole thing at once) is a shift from the usual freshman course in which you traditionally build up to the 500-word theme at the end. I claimed earlier that a major goal of this course is to help the student meet the requirements of writing for his own field, and one model for all may seem like a contradiction. But all kinds of individual help (which you can give as the semester goes on) won't do much good if he can't get his ideas into some kind of logical order--fast.

That is why the presentation of a "process model" is as important as the product model. It's one thing to show the student what his essay

should look like when it's finished. We all know how much good that does. What the student needs and deserves from us is a method for achieving that product. And unless you believe writing is a series of skills, you can't very well give him that process--which is, at last you're probably thinking--the rationale for those two assumptions for the instructor I mentioned very early. Give them a step-by-step process and they'll give you the product. Remembering, of course, that flexibility should be built into both the product and the process.

The second focus of the first five weeks is paragraph development. Both product and process models are presented. I give my students, for example, models for thirty to forty kinds of paragraphs (depending on my energy that week) and at the drop of a latchei they can write one, two, or thirty of those kinds. Like forty different paragraphs on the way MacDonald's makes hamburgers.

The second unit moves into style, sentence structure, and word choice, emphasizing proofreading and revising techniques, a practical rather than theoretical approach. Students who have only one paper to write before graduation and who will, they say, have a secretary to correct their spellbug (let's hope the secretary takes the course too) will hardly be interested in going beyond the first five weeks. But many students will. The variable-credit approach gives them that choice. They can even skip the middle five weeks and return for the third unit, as some of them do.

The first two units (the whole theme and style) may require some fancy footwork from the instructor because of the speed with which a great deal of material must be presented. But there is little that is new in content. That makes it easier. It is only in the third unit, reading and research techniques, that the instructor will need to tailor

his materials to meet specialized student needs--the biologist or the business analyst, for example. But the students should bring models with them from other courses or professional situations. We can't be experts in everything, and we shouldn't try. We need the help of faculty in other disciplines to give us the models they want their students to follow. And this is a project I am currently very much involved in at VCU.

Course organization, then, can be relatively simple; the paperwork, hopefully, will be left to the registrat's office. I have special permission, for example, to add and delete students from my rolls when I turn in my final grades. Thus I do not have to keep sending in new rolls and class information every time a student adds or changes credit:

Variable credit advanced composition for non-English majors, then, offers these special advantages to students and faculty:

(1) emphasis on practical writing skills rather than theory

(2) emphasis on helping students meet his particular writing needs

(3) offering students a choice of credit and workload

(4) maximizing the alternatives for learning and teaching effective communication for students who write only when they need to.